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ABSTRACT

A positive critique of three studies on cultural assimilation of Mexican Americans ("Dimensions of the New Immigration to the United States and the Prospects for Assimilation" by Douglas Massey, a series of articles by Miriam Wells, and "Language, Mexican Immigration, and the 'Human Connection': A Perspective from the Ethnography of Communication" by Jose Limon) argues that three key terms in assimilation studies--biologism, primitivism, and voluntarism--need replacement with a broader sense of agency, the analysis of cultural practices, and the study of racism. Voluntarism suggests that the assimilation process, both successes and failures, involve formally free choices within a socially given opportunity structure and should be displaced, in the author's view, by the analysis of racism. Primitivism suggests that assimilation is the movement from an authentic culture that is regarded as if it were a relic to be preserved just as it was, when, in fact, cultures undergo ongoing processes of change, making the notion of linear movement of assimilation from Mexican to Anglo problematic. Biologism suggests that people, as they become middle class, follow middle class norms of family size and occupation and conflates with class and culture, for such people may not be assimilated, but simply middle class. (NEC)

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Assimilation Revisited

by
Renato Rosaldo

Working Paper Series No. 9

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Assimilation has always been a vexed issue. The term itself contains a double meaning and can refer either to structural or to cultural assimilation. Cultural assimilation, often going under the name of acculturation, has to do with fluency, both in the linguistic sense and in the broader sense of the skills required to succeed in the majority group's formal institutions and informal social situations. People who are acculturated speak properly, know how to behave, and are well educated for the job at hand. Structural assimilation, in contrast, refers to equal opportunity, or the capacity of minorities to enter any available position in the dominant society. Such people, depending on their talent and desire to apply it, could in principle become anything, from president to street sweeper. Thus the term refers both to personal identity (acculturation) and the social availability of opportunities (structural assimilation).

From a political perspective, assimilation has contradictory implications. For minority people, structural assimilation has long been advocated under the name of affirmative action or equal opportunity. All people should have better jobs, or at any rate a fair opportunity to fill them. The other side of the coin, however, has been that affirmative action could bring a loss of ethnic personal identity and ethnic political voice, so that a short-run victory could bring long-run defeat to minority movements.

For majority people, assimilation can also be either a conservative or a liberal stance. Conservatives see assimilation as a means of absorbing a threatening population whereas liberals

view the same phemonenon as democratic and egalitarian as opposed to an apartheid-like system where minorities occupy only the lowest rung of the social ladder. Apparently, the same phenomenon can readily lead to either cheers or hisses.

Yet terminological ambiguities and contradictory perceptions of assimilation can also mask deeper problems of conceptual analysis. To put it bluntly, for all the heated debate the phenomenon of assimilation has been poorly understood. At this stage aggregate data analysis should be supplemented through circumstancial case studies that produce new questions and new understandings of how the process works. Many statistical studies of assimilation assume the answers to the very questions that should be asked; they work with indices of a process that is taken to be well understood rather than attempting to discover dynamics and appropriate indicators. Most analysts have been rather like the infamous archer who shoots an arrow at the wall and then draws a bull's-eye around it.

In the broadest terms, three problems have proven stultifying in assimilation studies. First, rather than asking about agency, including, foremost among other things, social reproduction and mechanisms for cultural creativity, analysts have concentrated on the individual organism and its literal biological reproduction (having children). Second, instead of considering actual practices in a manner that highlights innovation and change, scholars have indulged a primitivism that regards culture as a relic, an inert heirloom handed down wholecloth from time immemorial. Third, rather than discuss

racism as an array of ideological practices, studies have deployed a market model complete with an opportunity structure and a individual who voluntarily chooses among viable alternatives. Let us, for the sake of argument, call the three vices informing such studies biologism, primitivism, and voluntarism. I propose replacing them, respectively, with a broader sense of agency, the analysis of cultural practices, and the study of racism.

Although my project is theoretical, I hope to lend substance to abstractions by developing a positive critique of three studies on assimilation. The studies have been chosen precisely because they contain so much to admire, and thus make fine subjects for argument. This essay, I suppose, follows the venerable academic ritual of praising through critical analysis and disagreement. Yet the topic of assimilation, if it is to be revived, requires precisely this kind of pointed debate.

Let me begin with an essay by Douglas Massey (1981) entitled "Dimensions of the New Immigration to the United States and the Prospects for Assimilation." One immediately detects a note of fear in the article: immigration during the 1970s has been of enormous proportions, approaching the high water mark for the twentieth century. His central question is: can the United States assimilate these massive numbers of new immigrants? It is as if the nation were an organism attempting to absorb an unpalatable element newly entered in its environment.

The biologism in the argument perhaps comes to the fore most clear in the dubious assertion that, "Once intermarriage occurs,

all other types of assimilation are held to follow automatically (Massey 1981: 70)." In many case the children of intermarriage are regarded as members of one ethnic group or another, not both. Perhaps the dynamics emerge most clearly in black-Anglo intermarriages where the children, because of racism, are viewed as black, not a half-and-half biological mixture.

The analysis considers the following factors: familism, fertility, intermarriage, residential segregation, political participation, and social mobility. Yet, in fact, all seven factors can be reduced to social mobility, the single variable of which they are functions. Massey puts the matter in the following terms:

> It should now be apparent that a key factor affecting the future of new immigrant groups in US society is social mobility. By whatever criteria considered--familism, fertility, political participation, residential segregation, or intermarriage--degree of social integration tends to increase with social class. The process of immigrant assimilation is fundamentally one of social mobility (1981: 72).

That is, the greater the degree of social mobility the smaller the family networks (familism), the fewer children born to women of suitable age (fertility), the higher the rates of marriage across ethnic lines (intermarriage), the smaller the proportion of people residing in barrios or ghettos (residential segregation), and the more people voting (political participation). The last item appears hopeful, but the good news of increased political participation goes hand-in-hand with the

bad news that the socially mobile ignore Chicano organizations.

What exactly do these findings represent? The social reproduction of cultural traditions, always a process that is selective and innovative as well as preservative, has been reduced to class affiliation where to be ethnic is to be working class. To become middle class, one is supposed to believe (despite, for example, the black bouregoisie), is to lose ethnic idenitity. Presumably the postulated process of assimilation involves approximations toward a putative Anglo (middle class) norm of isolated nuclear families with relatively few children. With intermarriage it appears that the analyst (rather dubiously) has assumed that the off-spring gravitate toward the cultural practices of the Anglo parent. Or perhaps this analysis entails an even more questionable notion of biologically diluting the race. Only residential segregation suggests that a cultural heritage is acquired through participation in community life. The pertinent questions about assimilation, however,should concern community organization and the active processes of cultural selection and innovation. What constitutes the culture and through what forms of life does it thrive, change, or languish?

The second study I shall consider is a series of articles by Miriam Wells (1975, 1976, 1980), an anthropologist who teaches at the University of California, Davis. These articles discuss questions of assimilation in relation to a small town in Wisconsin (which she calls Riverside). Her model depicts the interplay of the objective opportunity structure and subjective

motivations. Wells describes her analysis in the following manner:

> The structural conditions outlined in the previous sections encouraged relocation but did not compel it. Understanding of the reasons why some chose to settle in Wisconsin and others continued to migrate is furthered by examination of the decision making process itself, the manner in which individuals and families weighed the costs and benefits of moving north (1976: 279).

The notion is that any society makes available certain opportunities, and not others, so that personal motivations dictate choices made among the socially available options. The underlying assumptions resemble those of neo-classical economists studying how people choose jobs or select commodities in a supermarket.

To simplify a more complex argument, Wells says that migrants passing through Riverside can decide either to remain in the migrant stream or to settle out by remaining in Wisconsin. Those who remain in the migrant stream usually have relatively strong personal networks of kinship, compadrazgo, and mutual indebtedness; those who settle out have relatively more ability in English, more education, and more varied occupational backgrounds that the former. The latter group, it would seem, is more assimilated than the former, yet the differences do not appear all that great (for example, 6.9 versus 5.8 median school years completed). Although Mexican migrants are not homogeneous, the differences between the two groups appear to be more a

continuum than two polar types: the assimilated and the unassimilated.

When the Anglo population of Riverside is considered, the issue grows more complex. Although the town, in certain formal contexts, proclaims its cultural homogeneity, its informal practices point to hierarchically ordered divisions based on the following different national origins: Yankee elite (5%), Irish Catholic (10%), German Lutheran and Catholic (15%). and Polish (70%). These groupings correspond roughly with the historical sequence in which they migrated to Riverside as well as internal class lines. The informal practices through which these divisions are known and made real have to do with patterns of socializing. The elite enjoys its own literary and bridge clubs. The middle class has its Jaycees and Junior Women's Clubs. The working class plays at its bowling and snowmobile clubs. Even among so-called Anglos, assimilation has not produced a homogeneous group, as Wells explains in the following:

> The paradigm of assimilation does not adequately characterize the process or outcomes of intergroup relations in this case. Length of residence and exposure to a dominant culture do not compel a steady and unilinear homogenization (1975: 321).

Supppose Mexican migrants do settle out. How can they simply become Anglo when that population is itself so internally differentiated?

Yet the Mexican migrants cannot assimilate for a further reason. In ways that distinguish them from the Yankee, Irish, German, and Polish former migrants, they face a racist ideology

that distinguishes them sharply from their predecessors to the small Wisconsin town. Wells describes this ideology, but she depicts it in terms of negative stereotypes rather than racism. Much as Sigmund Freud insisted on speaking about sexual rather than erotic attachments, analysts should not replace the term racism with more diluted euphemisms, such as stereotyping. Wells suggests that the negative stereotypes derive from experience with early migrants in the 1940s and "similar stereotypes held elsewhere in the United States (1980: 284)." Her depiction of the stereotypes works through a series of polar contrasts where the Anglos are stable, responsible, industrious, smart, clean, moral, optimistic, and the Mexicans are itinerant, irresponsible, lazy, stupid, dirty, criminal, fatalistic. Surely this list of opposed characteristics has been sufficiently publicized in the work of Octavio Romano and elsewhere, so that its existence can be attributed more to a pervasive pattern of American racism than to local experiences with Mexican migrants in the 1940s.

Racism, of course, involves practices as well as beliefs, and Wells develops a series of anecdotes about how matters work in everyday life. Somebody, for example, needs a leaky faucet repaired, but, even after five phone calls, the plumber takes three weeks to arrive and do the job. Similarly, the city welfare director denies families emergency aid even though they meet the criteria of need and length of local residence. Informal practices thus work hand-in-hand with explicit prejudice in creating the small yet pervasive humiliations that attempt to diminish Mexican migrants by making them into an inferior race.

The analysis of racism, however, suggests that the voluntarism of the interplay of opportunity structures and individual motivations fails to provide the terms for showing how apparent opportunities often cannot become real in practice for the Mexican migrants.

A third essay, this time by Jose Limon, will round out the discussion. Limon's essay, entitled "Language, Mexican Immigration, and the 'Human Connection': A Perspective from the Ethnography of Communication," develops a micro-ethnography of El Redondo restaurant. His analysis shows that, just as the Anglo population of Riverside, Wisconsin is internally differentiated, so too is the Mexican population in Austin, Texas. In order to depict this variation, Limon sets his characters in their distinctive scenes. Sitting at the tables are middle class Anglos. In the kitchen are the undocumented workers, two cooks and a dish handler. Standing before a long horizontal window are two Mexican-American waitresses shouting their customers' orders to the cooks. At the edge of the dining floor by their carts are the busboys, undocumented workers whose life chances differ markedly from those of the cooks. Although the cooks make higher wages, the busboys interact more with the Mexican-American waitresses and thereby more rapidly learn English, enter an indefinite period of bilingualism, and enhance their long-run chances of job improvement. So far, so good.

The analysis considers yet another scene, the after hours bar scene, where what Victor Turner would have called a liminal space is cleared. Limon sketches the scene in these terms:

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> [L]ate at night between ten and midnight and after the restaurant has closed, a kind of mild symbolic inversion occurs in the bar. During this time the owner permits all of his workers to sit around the bar and have drinks for half price. Mexican-American waitresses, undocumented Mexicans, owners and family and a few privileged Anglo and Mexican-American middle class regulars sit around with a mild and temporary suspension of role/status differences engaged in free flowing conversations ranging from the Mexican oil economy to the fate of the football team (p. 12).

Curiously, the owners and their family stand in the background, as if they did not count. Yet all the mini-scenes--sitting at tables, in the kitchen, before the long window, at the edge of the dining floor, in the after hours bar--are emcompassed by El Redondo restaurant itself. How can the owners be left out?

The problem in large measure appears to be Limon's assumption that the owners have assimilated. When I asked Limon about the owners, he said that they were middle class, spoke rusty Spanish, and they voted Republican. Yet they do hang out in the after hours bar, and they have created, perhaps against their own intentions, a scene of cultural reproduction, not as simple maintenance of static form, but as creative ferment, a complex mix of innovation and preservation. Restaurants that cater to a middle class clientele surely are a transcultural phenomenon. Cultures themselves never are sealed by impermeable membranes, but instead they are always in process, borrowing and

lending across their pourous boundaries, and inventing ever new scenes and combinations of scenes. Even if the Mexicans had stayed in Mexico, they could well be subjected to similar conditions that would lead to comparable creativity on their parts. The notion of cultural reproduction thus should not be reduced, as it was in Massey's analysis, to biological reproduction. Nor should it imply that things must stay as they were, preserving an authentic relic, the true primitive culture, just as it was. Indeed, even it the owners lost their Spanish entirely, they still would be key agents in an institution that perpetuates a changing culture through time.

To recapitulate, my argument has been that assimilation studies have three key terms that need replacement. These terms are biologism, primitivism, and voluntarism.

Voluntarism suggests that the assimilation process, both its successes and failures, involve formally free choices within a socially given opportunity structure. The notion, in other words, is that a society presents its members (or at any rate a structural segment of its members) with a specific set of options. The members, in turn, choose among those options based on their personal motivations. This was the analysis in Wells (1976).

Yet other writings by Wells highlight the import of racist ideology, both as formal beliefs and as informal practices. The choices people make may be more apparent than real when one takes into account the small brutalities of everyday life that Mexican migrants can encounter when they try to have leaky faucets

repaired. The analysis of racism should displace voluntarism.

Primitivism suggests that assimilation is the movement from an authentic culture that is regarded as if it were a relic to be preserved just as it was. Yet cultures, in all times and in all places, undergo ongoing processes of change. Even as one generation succeeeds another, the successors select, innovate, and recombine elements from the culture of their predecessors. The process combines continuity and change, old patterns and new developments.

Indeed, both Wells and Limon point to the internal differentiations of both Anglo and Mexican cultures, for neither is homogeneous. This fact in itself makes the notion of a linear movement of assimilation from Mexican to Anglo problematic. The complication only deepens if one considers that assimilation need not be a hydraulic process where as one rises the other falls. People could become increasingly fluent in an Anglo cultural milieu at the same time that they become more fluent in a local Mexican culture. Whether the latter fluency involves Mexican standard Spanish, rural Mexican speech, or Chicano English depends on the ongoing practices of a local community.

Biologism suggests that the unit of reproduction is the biological individual who, of course, must have children in order to perpetuate herself through time. To suggest that people, as they become middle class, follow middle class norms of family size and occupation conflates class and culture. Such people, after all, may be, not assimilated, but simply middle class.

The key questions of cultural reproduction involve the means

by which communities, movements, and institutions perpetuate themselves through time, as dynamic changing constellations and not as static entities. El Redondo restaurant provides a context within which dynamic cultural reproduction takes place. No matter how much they stutter and no matter how they vote, the middle class owners are key agents in this process of cultural reproduction. Chicano middle class politics need not be progressive, indeed in general they probably are not. My analysis simply suggests that good politics and degrees of assimilation most probably do not correspond with one another.

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